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CIA should still handle defections, Meese says

By Bill Gertz and John McCaslin
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Attorney General Edwin Meese III said yesterday he opposes plans to shift responsibility for the handling of Soviet intelligence defectors from the Central Intelligence Agency to the FBI.

In a wide-ranging interview during a Washington Times luncheon, Mr. Meese also said the Justice Department could take action against Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan if he defies President Reagan's ban on travel to Libya.

The White House announced last month it was considering several proposals on reforming the CIA's procedures for dealing with defectors. The proposals were drawn up following the case of Soviet KGB intelligence officer Vitaly Yurchenko who defected to the United States, recanted and returned to Moscow last November after denouncing the CIA.

"I don't see any great reason for changing who handles defectors," Mr. Meese said. "If there were problems in regard to the handling of Yurchenko, or anybody else, those can be corrected by the [CIA]."

His comments were the first official Justice Department response to the White House statements of the proposed policy change.

Mr. Meese said he did not know what went wrong with the Yurchenko case since the defector was handled by CIA officials.

Reforming current procedures, he said, would be more effective than attempting to put the FBI into a role for which it has no experience.

On the Yurchenko defection, Mr. Meese said, "We do think he gave us valuable information, which has been proved out."

Mr. Yurchenko supplied leads that resulted in the arrest of former National Security Agency analyst Ronald Pelton and helped uncover former CIA operations officer Edward L. Howard, who fled the United States to avoid arrest on spy charges.

FBI officials have said a number of other cases have been opened that were based on Mr. Yurchenko's information, but so far no

further arrests have been made.

Regarding Mr. Farrakhan, Mr. Meese said the Justice Department would be prepared to take action against the Islamic leader, who, during a press conference Wednesday, said he would go to Libya in defiance of a presidential ban.

Mr. Reagan has blamed Libyan leader Col. Muammar Qaddafi for promoting terrorism throughout the world, and recently issued a ban on travel by Americans to the north African state.

"Depending on what [Farrakhan] does or how he does it, if the law is violated, I think he should be prosecuted," Mr. Meese said.

On a separate issue, Mr. Meese said he believed a proposal would soon be submitted to President Reagan that would prohibit numerical hiring "quotas" for federal contractors.

"There's been a lot more press disinformation than there has been information — statements, for example, that I want to roll back ... the 1965 executive order" on affirmative action.

"Nothing could be further from the truth," Mr. Meese said.

Signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson, the presidential order's guidelines require contractors doing business with the government to hire women and minorities in certain numbers to prevent job discrimination.

On U.S. counterespionage efforts, Mr. Meese said the Justice Department has been working to limit the number of Soviet bloc spies in the United States.

"I once said, somewhat kidding, that we ought to have an agreement with the Soviets that they would not send over more spies than we have FBI agents to follow them — make that a function of the budget," Mr. Meese said. "Obviously that continues to be a problem."

On domestic security, Mr. Meese said he was satisfied with FBI guidelines for investigation of domestic political groups. Those guidelines, set up by former Attorney General William French Smith, "have served the country well" by protecting citizens from oppressive police work but allowing security operations to be carried out, Mr. Meese said.